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Christ in Art

Notes on the John Powell Lenox Collection

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By Frank Weitenkampf, L.H.D.
Chief, Art and Prints Division

New York
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1920

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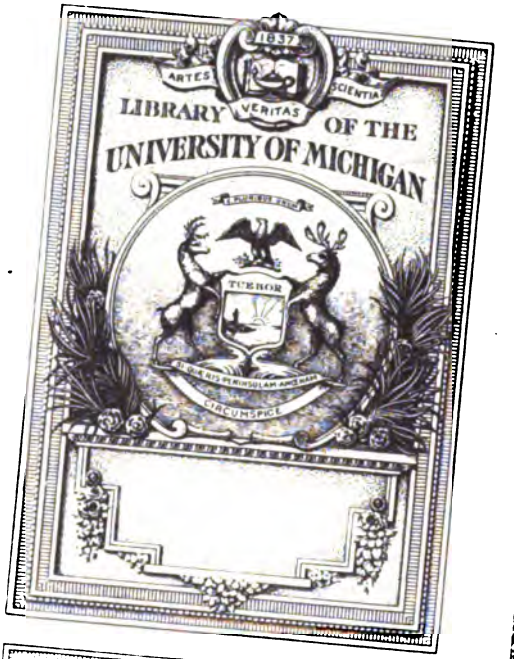

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CHRIST IN ART

(NOTES ON THE JOHN POWELL LENOX COLLECTION)

THE Art Division of the Library has, from the beginning, tried to satisfy the public interest in Bible pictures. These were to be found, not only in illustrated books, but in separate prints of all kinds, which could be arranged and classified so that a request for illustrations of a given Bible scene or portrait could be answered promptly and to some degree fully. Thus, a useful collection of pictures (especially of the Saviour) was being formed, supplemented by a classified lot of titles in the card catalogue, referring to numerous plates in books, or prints in portfolios shelved apart from the Bible collection, with such specialties, for instance, as "persepios" listed under *Nativity*. And now, at one stroke, through the generosity of Mr. John Powell Lenox, of Oak Park, Ill., there has come to the Library a wonderful body of pictorial documents dealing entirely with the life of Christ. The result of a quarter of a century of patient collecting, on the part of Mr. Lenox, these pictures, several thousand in number, are mounted in fifteen finely bound volumes with the general title "Christus in Arte." The prints are arranged in the order of accession, but the donor has prepared a card index of painters.

In this collection may be traced the development of the portraiture of Christ from the early representations in the Catacombs of Rome, down through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and to modern times. The history of art, with all the kaleidoscopic changes in outlook and tendencies which make up the development of this field of mental activity, is reflected to a great extent in this body of Christian portraiture.

As to the question of actual life portraits of our Lord, nothing stronger than legend or tradition seems to have been adduced to support the claims of such productions as the reputed portrait by St. Luke or the sudarium of Veronica bearing the impression of the holy face. At all events, this is not the place to enter on any discussion of this question, in which one has the choice between F. W. Farrar *contra* and Wyke Bayliss *pro* authenticity of likeness. One interesting and significant fact remains, and that is, that down throughout the changes of time and country during nineteen centuries a certain definite type of face prevails and persists.

F. W. Farrar finds that "the primitive Christians shrank from any direct presentment of the human Christ," and, in fact, entire realism did

not come until the Renaissance. Meanwhile, in the words of Raoul Rochette, "an art is not improvised," and the early Christian art grew from that of antiquity. The earliest pictures of Christ, then, were, as Lanciani says, "ideal and symbolic in character, conventional types," Orpheus charming the animals being a particularly favorite pattern. These, as well as the various statues of Christ as the Good Shepherd, are beardless. About the fourth century artists passed from these classical forms to realistic portrayal taking on the familiar face which has persisted. For some centuries the ideal of Christ was expressed in the stereotyped and rigid conventionality of Byzantine art as we know it, for instance, in mosaics. With the dawn of the Renaissance the presentation of Christ took on, with Giotto and Masaccio, a vital reality which, as this great period burst into its full bloom, developed into a life, a spirituality which marks the best of the pictures of the Saviour treasured by the world to-day.

There have been numerous efforts to express the ideal face, with a great variety brought about by the natural influence of period, nationality and individual viewpoint, joined to the great body of tradition lying back of the artist in each case. Maxwell, in his "Annals of Spanish Art," says: "In the hands of Roman artists the Saviour is often little more than a beautiful Apollo copied from the marbles of Greece; at Venice, a noble personage of the blood of Barberigo or Contarini; while in the later and feebler school of Bologna His beauty sinks into effeminacy, and the Man-God into a mere mortal Adonis."

As we look through a collection of pictures such as this we see the ascetic Christ give place to the more saintly type, then with the Renaissance beauty of lineaments is accentuated, the appeal of physical suffering is made with a loss of higher spiritual import, and finally in our present times we have seen efforts to treat scenes in the life of Christ with realism and modernity and yet a preservation of natural dignity and sanctity of the subject. It is, of course, natural, as the pictures pass before one, to note characteristics of individual artists, — the "majestic calm" (to quote Sir Martin Conway) of Hubert van Eyck's regal Christ; the devotional feeling of Fra Angelico and Bartolommeo; the austerity of Mantegna; "the conflict of the impulses of Christianity and Hellenism" in Botticelli; the "spiritual feeling" of Da Vinci's conception for the "Last Supper"; the rugged, sculptural effect of Verrocchio; the masculinity of Michel Angelo (in contrast to the languorous effeminacy so often met with); the moving pathos of Guido Reni's

famous "Ecce Homo," which, true product of the decadence, skirts bathos in its effort to inspire emotion; the strong realism of Velasquez ("Christ Scourged"); the nobility and naturalism, product of devotion, of Juan Juanes; and above all, perhaps, the tender sympathetic humanity of Rembrandt's "Supper at Emmaus" (giving, as La Farge said, "both the fact and the mystery"), a scene with all the spiritual content which, in similar pictures by the great Italians, is often lacking, lost in the imposing magnificence of the setting. Or, dealing with the artists in national groups, one notes preponderance of characterization over beauty in old Flemish art; the gaunt, at times cadaverous, countenance presented by the early artists of the Netherlands and Germany; the displacement of the ascetic Christ by the beautiful one in Venetian art; the somewhat sensuous expressiveness of the Italian High Renaissance, which could take on the sickly beauty of a Barroccio (over against which one might set the crass, agonizing realism of fifteenth century Grünewald); the robust conceptions fathered by Rubens and Van Dyck; the austere solemnity, tending to the morbid, of the old Spanish school; or the rather sentimental attitude of certain nineteenth century artists, which again trails into such quite personal conceptions as Holman Hunt's figure of Christ the carpenter throwing the shadow of the cross as He stretches Himself at the end of His day's work. In our own day we have seen also, in the works of Beraud, Uhde and others, the placing of the traditional Christ figure in modern surroundings, as did the earlier painters in their day.

In all the long record of pictorial illustration of Christ and His ministry, from the Nativity to the Crucifixion and Ascension, with the widely varied play of artistic imagination directed at the realization of the features of the Saviour, there is emphasized the old truth stated again by J. R. Aitken: "However sure the touch, or wise the hand, heart counts more than hand, and soul than touch. If there be no sureness of life, and no wisdom of deeds, the hand is curbed and the vision marred. If there be no lifting of the heart and the life, the highest skill will not avail." Thus we have come to the fundamental principle in all art, that it is the artist behind the work that counts; as Millet said, "the artist must be moved himself." Here particularly, in these attempts to realize the character of one who, even apart from any divine attributes, stands to-day as the very embodiment of human sympathies and noble aspirations, the artist inevitably reveals himself and to a great extent his time. For as all art worth while is an expression of time and place,

so these many representations of Christ reflect the mental attitude of their day, — in not a few cases the racial characteristics of the painter. In the end, therefore, humanity's soul is bared in these conceptions of the Saviour, and so these pictures illustrate in their way a large section of the history of human development.

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